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Introduction. The fear of big numbers: the politics and politicisation of African demographic change

Abstract

Since the beginning of the 2000s, scientific research and studies by international organisations have converged in identifying new major trends in African demography for the decades to come, contributing to reshape the public representations of Africa from a low population continent to one of rampant growth. At the same time, the public discourse emerged in the West regarding these changes occurred under the sign of a dramatised politicisation rather than a scientifically based debate. Under the pressure of the recent "migration crisis" in Europe, this politicised Euro-African demography has set itself at the centre of public and media debates in many European nations, based on alarming demographic predictions that oppose a succumbing "old Europe" to an emerging "young Africa". Against this background, the goal of this introduction is twofold: outlining a history of concepts and ideas pertaining to African demography in its political dimension; identifying spaces for dialogue and cooperation between different disciplines and reconsider epistemological and methodological conventions with the goal of responding to the challenges of the politicization of African demographic dynamics.

Keywords

African demographic change, politicised demographic data, great replacement theories, population theories

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The politics of African demographic changes

Since the beginning of the 2000s, scientific research and studies by international organisations have converged in identifying new major trends in African demography for the decades to come, contributing to reshape the public representations of Africa from a low population continent to one of rampant growth.[1] Sort of a latecomer within the demographic transition that in the 20th century had depicted the demographic transformations in Europe and successively in the other continents, Africa has projected itself into the 21st century as the only area to record, as often commented, unprecedented and sustained population growth. Building on changes that already appeared in previous decades, the African population – according to most estimates – will continue to grow, reaching a significant peak around 2050 and then slowly coming to a halt around 2100. As reported by the UN 2024 Revision of World Population Prospects,[2] in mid-2015 the sub-Saharan African population – significantly in the most recent statistics separated from North Africa, which, for similarity of demographic trends, is instead united with Western Asia – was estimated to be around 1 billion. Sub-Saharan African population is projected to be 1.9, 2.1 or 2.3 billion by 2050 and the UN medium scenario projection for 2100 indicates 3.4 billion with the highest scenario well above 4 billion. The population of Sub-Saharan Africa, thus, is expected to double from 2015 to 2050 and might potentially quadruplicate in 2100 due to the "stock" already accumulated, despite a predicted slowing down of the fertility rates in the continent. The pace of this growth, surely peculiar, is usually emphasised in this genre of global demographic accounts: since the 1960s and until mid-1990s Africa has, in fact, distinctively recorded rates of population growth above 2.5 percent per year and slightly less in the following years (Asia for instance had in the same period rates below 1.5 percent).[3] The increase expressed in relative terms is even more visible as in the other world regions population growth is slowing down or has already reached its peak. While Africa's share of global population was 9 percent in 1950, it will increase to around 20 percent in 2050 and, according to current predictions, to about 35-40 percent near 2100. In other words, Africa will be responsible of the largest share of increase of world population in the next decades: between 2019 and 2050 more than half of the total increase in global population is expected to come from sub-Saharan Africa. General representations point out also a few typical examples. More African states will appear by the end of the century within the ranks of the 10 most populated states in the world: not only Nigeria, but also Ethiopia, Democratic Republic

of Congo (DRC), Egypt and Tanzania, while other smaller states, like Niger, are pinpointed among those maintaining the world-fastest population growth. Already in 1949, however, the renowned sociologist and demographer Alfred Sauvy questioned the real significance of such large aggregates of numbers, extrapolated from the specific life contexts and social and economic systems in which people conduct their lives and turned into purely abstract terms (Demeny and McNicoll 2006a). Even more significantly, particularly when referring to the period after 2050, these numbers are highly speculative.[4] While official UN predictions contemplate low-, medium-and high-variants, in the public debate the most cited figures generally refer to the highest forecast (4 to 4.5 billion in 2100). Moreover, since 2010, the recurring revisions of these estimates have invariably lowered growth predictions. Specifically, the UN 2024 Revision of World Population Prospects has stressed how the world population will probably peak well before 2100, contrary to what was previously expected, in particular due to "lower than-expected levels of fertility in recent years in some of the world's largest countries, particularly China".[5] Equally, Africa's prospects have been revised downward for the same reason.

In stark discontinuity with these trends, Europe, whose largest demographic acceleration and subsequent slowing down occurred between 1850 and 1950, will continue to witness, together with Asia and North and South America, a decrease in its share of world population and in fertility rates, only partially compensated by the extension of life expectancy. Since numbers however are always tricky, it is important to notice how Africa had substantially stagnant population between 1550 and 1850 and its current share of estimated world population (somewhere between 15 and 20 percent) corresponds to that of 1550 (17 percent) and is slightly higher than in 1750 (13 percent).[6] Compared to today's Africa, Europe is at the opposite end of the demographic transition process, what is conventionally called its phase four, characterised by low death and birth rates. Here fertility rates, as in the case of Italy, could even fall below the replacement fertility level. Predicting what could happen in a hypothetical phase five, or in a post-transition situation – stagnation or new rise in birth and fertility rates – is one of the most debated challenges in recent demographic studies.[7]

Implicitly or explicitly, all global reports here mentioned are quite sure about the consequences of these global changes: a rapid growth of international migration, particularly from Africa to Europe (Groth and May, 2017: p. 8,),[8] despite the fact that predictions in this field are even more speculative than

the ones regarding world population, and considering that the European border systems have already anticipated such potential moves and are working hard to prevent such outcome.[9] In parallel, a peculiar discussion has emerged in international circles and organisations prompting a debate on whether such demographic growth will produce economic progress or a global disaster; indeed, while some optimist analysts interpret the youth bulge as a potential demographic dividend due to the expansion of the working age population in Africa, others see the increment of Africa's population as likely to produce, as a World Bank's study put it, a planetary catastrophe.[10]

Against this background, besides the speculative nature of these global trends, other considerations must be emphasised, since a closer look at African demographic dynamics reveals a much more nuanced and complex picture. In the first place, the data presented above regard sub-Saharan Africa, while demographic trends in Northern Africa have already diverged, approaching those of Europe (see Conte, this issue). In the second place, we must notice that the main question in current African demography is not directly linked to envisioning the pace of the population growth and its global socio-political effects, but to account for the multiple forms, paces and pathways of the emerging African demographic transitions, as well as their non-unidirectionality. Contrary to accounts painted in broad strokes, scholars work on the local and intra-African implications of these changes and are engaged into an in-depth discussion on the historical variations and determinants of birth and death rates, crucial components of the demographic transition theory, as well as on the historical series and the socio-cultural determinants of the fertility transitions, or the relationships between the major demographic variables and changing economic contexts (we will return to these points in the last section). Again, crucial discussions nowadays do not focus on total population changes but, as we will see, on their age structure and its connection to evolving socio-economic systems and to migration.

Finally, even when such demographic developments directly connect to migration, this would presumably mean, building on current evidence, an increase in internal rather than international migration. Indeed, as confirmed by recent reports, and not differently from other continents, the largest share of African mobility involves intra-state migration, typically from rural to urban, as well as migration within Africa, due to migrants' preferences, costs and opportunities to move, and access to chosen destination. Intra-Africa mobility accounts for about the double of African migration to Europe. Further, ex-

tra-continental migration does not involve only Europe but increasingly also other destinations.[11] Even the current and future consequences of the (socio) climate crises in Africa have their major impact at local and regional level and tend to produce, besides social and political tensions, internal or regional migrations (de Haas et al. 2017). This is what mostly concerns African governments, not the external potential impacts of demographic growth.[12]

Adjusting the most dramatised representation of the global trends on world population to the current academic debate, the understanding of African demographic changes in the 21st century should thus clarify the potential transformations on African societies and economic structures of rapid population growth, in a multifactorial and non-deterministic perspective. In a 2006 general assessment on the politics of African demographic changes, Cristopher Clapham (2006) was extremely cautious in linking African continent to rapid population growth. He stressed how unpredictable its population dynamics have always been, as well as the recent destructive impact of HIV (on this point see also Iliffe 2006), thereby reproducing the more traditional picture of African demographic dearth. Abruptly, later reconstructions decisively shifted towards an emphasis on the "excess" of African population, framed in alarmist tones.

Although a little simplistic, the kind of discussion centred around the concept of "demographic dividend" raises the crucial points related to the politics of demographic changes in Africa: with a median age of its population just above 20 years, Africa's 21st century will be characterised, as occurred in the past in other regions, by a large presence of youth, in a time of expanding life expectancy, advanced conversion from rural to urban societies, global models of development and consumption, and economic prospects that are difficult to predict. Indeed, a first crucial question regards what forms of economic expansion this age transition may generate, or, in other words, what levels of economic expansion will be necessary to absorb this large portion of active population. Also, to what extent will these processes translate into migration, underemployment or unemployment? What will be the political consequences of all this? The expression demographic dividend, in a technical and policy-oriented language, refers to these issues as it hints at "the accelerated economic growth and increasing surplus resulting from an expansion of the working-age population with respect to the young dependent population" (Groth and May 2017, p. 1). Developed as attempt to explain the East-Asian economic miracle of the 1960s-90s, the concept presupposes specific demographic changes

occurring at given stages of demographic transition, in particular "shifts in age structure [..] triggered by rapid fertility decline" (id.). The latter condition is considered essential to minimise the ratio between dependent youths and working-age population, the central element of a demographic dividend model. We will discuss the specificities of African demographic transitions later, clearly, however, in order to contract the dependent youths, these have not only to reduce in number but also to transit, without emerging economies of delay or waithood (Honwana 2012), into the working-age cohort. The demographic dividend, thus, is not a given, but requires specific changes in the age-structure together with a favourable social and economic context preceding and accompanying the transition. The impression however is that African dynamics cannot be easily encompassed within such a rigid model. They may in fact present larger flexibility and adaptiveness demanding a more careful consideration, for instance, of the rural-urban relationships and of the role of the urban informal economies of services.

A second related question is linked to the political responses given to such structural changes by international organisations and African governments. The apparent neutrality of the following quote reveals its real political nature, as well as the political reactions that, implicitly or explicitly, took shape in the last 20 years:

> There is no doubt that the world demographic landscape of the 21st century will be heavily influenced by the potential quadrupling of the African population. In addition to shaping the future development prospects of the African continent itself, these trends will also influence global geopolitics and in particular the demographic trajectory of Europe due to potentially increasing migration flows (Groth and May 2017, p. 2).

The robust scientific production devoted to the actual or looked-for reduction of fertility in Africa and the extensive political production in terms of "border-enforcement" policies are indicative of the implicit directions pressured by policymakers at the international level. Behind such intentions, a specific politics of numbers founded on the idea of excess is clearly at play. In this sense, while in the next paragraph we will focus on the "fear of big numbers" related to the African demographic change, here we could talk about a real "threat of big numbers" where the latter are used as political leverage for drawing attention on African "problems" or more explicitly for responding to excessive population growth, so conceived. Clarify the specific take of African governments and society on this global discourse is a more complex affair. Surely the

"threat of big numbers" is used as interface and leverage in the relationship with international organisations, but specific power relationships and politics of knowledge are here clearly at play, in the way in which international and domestic policies are set and in the way in which knowledge to sustain such policies is produced and funded.

The fear of big numbers: the politicisation of African demographic changes

If African population changes highlight the political challenges above described, public discourse in western countries has tended of late to favour dramatised politicisation of supposed demographic trends rather than scientifically based debate. Sound demographic research on population changes and transitions in Africa has increasingly been countered by alarmist discourses widely propagated in diverse media. What we witness thus is a significant diversion from the more controlled (albeit also politically charged) debate fostered by international organisations and experts.

Let's rewind the tape back to the early 2000s, when the first reports and research on recent African demographic trends were published. In 2000, the UN Population Division issued a report entitled *Replacement Migration.*[13] This study stressed that during the first half of the 21st century European countries will experience concomitant processes of population decline and ageing, which will entail a notable decrease of the working-age population. The study further underlined that immigration from African countries, where high fertility persists notwithstanding incipient demographic transitions, could prove mutually beneficial in addressing the socio-economic implications of Afro-European demographic asymmetries and flows.[14] The term replacement used by the report was drawn from migration and demographic studies considering how migration could fit into broader models of social change and create a chain of interdependent migration flows, transformations and needs, resulting in shifts, notably transforming emigration into immigration countries or redefining specific models and areas of labour force recruitment (de Haas et al. 2017). European polemicists, for their part, were quick to substantify the qualifier "replacement", dissociating it from any serious demographic knowledge or analysis. Such views soon gained potent polemical currency. Alarming predictions opposed a succumbing "old Europe" to an emerging "young Africa". The long-established, versatile notion of "demographic substitution" rose to the

fore, not seldom with racist undertones recalling works of its much earlier proponents such as, to quote but one, Émile Driant (aka Capitaine Danrit), author of the 1895 "futuristic" novel *L'Invasion noire* (The Black Invasion). By way, in certain regards, of inverted symmetry to the literary forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, Bat Ye'or's 2005 *Eurabia: The Euro-Arab Axis* inspired a wave of imitators (see Önnerfors & Krouwel 2021). This book was notably superseded by Renaud Camus' 2011 *Le grand remplacement* (The Great Replacement),[15] a notion which found exceptional resonance among Islamophobic white supremacists (Obaidi et al. 2022).[16] Drawing on this stance and in the wake of the recent "migration crisis" in Europe - itself a sequel of the Syrian and Libyan conflicts - a "comparative Euro-African demography" has thus set itself at the centre of public and media debates in Europe and beyond.[17] Replacement theories and hypothetical scenarios intersecting migration and demography took shape in the extreme right wing of the political spectrum yet were soon largely adopted by populist movements, pervading ever broader segments of the political spectrum, sometimes recalling the technocratic forms of dramatisation described above.

In this framework, certain elements deserve further examination. With regard to the reasons behind these forms of politicisation, it appears that while the recent migration crisis acted as an accelerating factor, it also coincided more generally with the surge of populistic movements whose tenors directly posited direct links between demography, migration, and socio-political crises in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis. Several authors noticed from different perspectives (see for instance Ardeni 2020, Brown 2019, Krastev and Holmes 2019, Mudde 2007), how substitution, scapegoating and projecting mechanisms were at play. In fact, as Krastev and Holmes observe, the widespread fear of dilution of national identities in Europe reflects the substitution of an illusory danger (immigration) for a real danger (depopulation and demographic collapse in conjunction with rising inequalities and economic crisis) (2019: 37-38). In the Italian case, Ardeni (2020) has clearly demonstrated how the areas in which populist movements gained traction do not correspond to the areas in which immigrant communities have more densely settled, rather to those where processes of economic crisis and restructuring have had a large impact. Just as the politicisation of migration in our societies reaches back to the early 1990s, the demography-migration-politics continuum has to be understood in the light of the structural instability of neoliberal economic policies and political structures, exacerbated by the recurrent conjunction of

episodes such as the post-2000 "war on terror" or, as mentioned, the post-2008 economic crisis as well as the 2014-18 "migration crisis" in Europe. Here arises, we suggest, "the fear of big numbers" by way of opposition to Appadurai's "fear of small numbers"; this expression draws on a theorisation of the idea of a "threatened majority" (Appadurai 2006, p. 61) resulting from either identity dynamics or the dialectical intermeshing of a sense of incompleteness and of purity. In our reconstruction, the production of a threatened majority reflects more specific socio-economic tensions that emerge with the contradictions or crises associated with certain historical conjunctures.

Further, with regard to the observed directions and forms of political dramatisation, it is striking to note the expanding resonance and turbulent trajectories of these discourses across time and space.[18] The "submersion" trope hails back to the heyday of European imperialism. Among the numerous prophets of demographic doom, suffice it here to name Hermann Knackfuß who in 1895 produced a widely disseminated lithograph warning of the "Yellow Peril"; this illustration, entitled "Peoples of Europe, preserve your holiest treasures", was executed according to the sketches of German Kaiser Wilhelm II.[19]

In the Weimar years, the fear of an Asian invasion was superseded by that of Semitic "subversion from within", of so-called *Unterwanderung*, or infiltration. In 1925, Hitler's favourite author, Arthur Dinter, committed a novel entitled *Die Sünde wider das Blut*, (The Sin Against the Blood) in which the seduction of an innocent Aryan girl by a singular Jew would lead by repercussion to the destruction of the entire "body of the German people" (*das deutsche Volkskörper*). This best-seller poses the premise, dear to racist logic, of "inverted potency", whereby the pure (Aryans) are many yet weak, but the alien "polluters" prepotent albeit few. The few thereby become the many, leading to the accomplishment of *Überfremdung* (alienation of identity). The "logic" of this proposition, preposterous as it may appear, has proven highly adaptable, since it can be applied by extension to "aliens" of all descriptions, internal or external, be they different by colour, creed, origin, or all at once. In contemporary European contexts, it can easily be articulated, indeed strengthened, when connected to the "fear of big numbers" legitimated with reference to "self-evident" demographic "facts", as admonished by Renaud Camus (2011).

To consider but one instance thereof, the "alienation" argument, albeit overtly devoid of antisemitic undertones, was exhumed in the run-up to the 2004 Swiss referenda on freedom of movement in the Schengen area. Posters showing black hands grabbing precious Swiss passports emanated from the

nationalist *Schweizerische Volkspartei* (Swiss People's Party, SVP) flourished in public space, which expressly reproduced the graphic style adopted in *Gauleiter* Julius Streicher's once popular antisemitic weekly *Der Stürmer* (The Stormtrooper). A graph pinpointing Muslims (rather than Jews) was advertised in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, which extrapolated *ad absurdum* figures of the Federal Bureau of Statistics purporting that the proportion of "Muslims" (however obscurely defined) increased from 2.5 percent in 1990 to 4.5 percent in 2000, would rise to 9 percent in 2010, 18 percent in 2020, 36 percent in 2030 and to no less than 72 percent in 2040 (Conte 2006).

Jean-Marie Le Pen, for his part, proclaimed at a Marseille rally on 20 May 2014 that:

> in our country and all Europe, we have experienced a cataclysmic phenomenon: the migratory invasion, of which we have only seen the beginning of the onset … mass immigration is aggravated by a religious fact: a large part of these immigrants are Muslims, a religion with a vocation of conquest, even more so when it feels strong and [Muslims] feel numerous.

Europe, according to Le Pen, is facing a "risk of submersion".[20] Expounding upon the "demographic explosion" threatening the world in 2014, the founder of the *Front National* suggested in characteristically crude terms that "Monsignor Ebola can settle that in three months".[21] Toning down her father's pronouncements by an octave for reasons of electoral convenience, daughter Marine Le Pen, the matriarch of a now rechristened and conquering *Rassemblement National* (RN), stressed in September 2015 that her party "is there to listen to the cry of alarm of the French in the face of what must indeed be qualified as migratory submersion and the advanced destructuration of our national identity."[22] The "fear of big numbers" and of "ethno-national alienation" (*völkische Unterwanderung*) is a potent vote-catcher. So too, alien "submersion" of France was the leitmotiv of Jordan Bardella's media statements in the run-up to the June-July 2024 French parliamentary elections, as formulated in the RN's electoral leaflet in the runup of the European elections of June 2024:

> The migratory waves are only beginning. The year 2023 and the first two months of 2024 broke all records, as the number of entries emanating from the West African route alone increased by 541% [no source given]. At the hour of the Islamist peril and the great demographic tipping points, mass immigration today appears as an existential threat for the European nations.[23]

In these waves of politicisation – embracing several countries, including Italy[24] as well as Hungary, the UK, the US or even Northern Africa countries – a more technical stance, resonating not only in the populistic movements but also in a much larger audience, is the one epitomised by the success of books like Stephen Smith's 2018 *La Ruée vers l'Europe* (The Rush [or Scramble] Toward Europe), which, claiming to offer a neutral assessment of demographic "truths", claims that by mid-century Europe will be home to 150 to 200 million black African immigrants, ironically dubbed the "intruders at the gates" by Krastev and Holmes (2019: 33).

In a measured reaction to this discursive inflation, demographer and anthropologist François Héran observes that the notion of "great replacement" rests on a "two-legged thesis" (2019a), one quantitative, mainly relative to fertility differentials, the second qualitative, relative to cultural change and the fear of ethnoracial "infiltration" or *Unterwanderung.* The first error of "replacement theorists", he notes, is to consider that current fertility gaps between African and European populations will remain both high and constant, noting, firstly, that fertility among immigrants tends, with time, to adapt to locally prevalent levels and, secondly, that African countries will, albeit with a time lag, also experience demographic transition at home. The second misapprehension is to consider the encounter of immigrants and host populations in an essentialist, conflictual perspective. Yes, immigration does foster variegated (geo)political processes and reflexive acculturation, yet this must be assessed on the basis of sound data, which show it, as Héran notes, to be a "durable infusion" rather than a "massive intrusion" (2019b: 24; see too Héran 2017).[25] Nor should one forget that, contrary to preconceived ideas, African transcontinental emigration is, as already mentioned, proportionately scarce.[26] By contrast, the dissonance between the long-term decrease of Europe's working-age population and the restrictive immigration policies that bolster "fortress Europe" remains.[27]

The gloomiest forecasts concerning the "threat of overpopulation" are based on the so-called "ceteris paribus trick": by jointly positing the predictability of population growth and the unpredictability of economic and political developments, it is implicitly assumed that the latter will inevitably be overdetermined by the former. Concluding an analysis similar to the one we developed here – from the perspective of a longer-term history of Europe's "politics of fear" in its relations with the rest of the world and internal minorities (see Agier 2022) – Aristide Zolberg aptly recalls Amartya Sen's reflections on the 1960s-1970s fear of an impending "demographic bomb": "The emergency mentality based

on false beliefs in imminent cataclysms leads to breathless responses that are deeply counterproductive" (Sen 1994, quoted in Zolberg 2006, p. 237).

The challenges of the politicisation of big numbers: reconsidering epistemological and methodological conventions

The persistent misrepresentation of demographic and migratory processes alerts us to the necessity of a deep epistemological and methodological reflection. First, we need to consolidate a careful genealogical analysis of the mutual determinations of demography and politics as much as of the concepts that underlie abusive amalgams of population data and exclusionary ideologies. Secondly, to avoid such an analytical bias we need to closely connect the examination of demographic variables, of data on social and economic change and on mobility (urban, rural, regional, extra-continental) to specific contexts and to a diachronic perspective. We argue that this could be best attained by new explorations of forms and methods for analysing population dynamics, uncovering the underlying politics of numbers and calling into collaboration multiple fields of study. The essays presented in this special issue specifically try to pursue such goal, by means of different disciplinary perspectives whereby to identify spaces for dialogue and cooperation.

Demography and politics in history

Population theory and political economy have travelled close and overlapping paths from the very moment the former arose under the auspices of the latter, nourishing political horizons, programmes, and concerns. The 18th century notion of political arithmetic (Sussmann 2004) and the dispute opposing Condorcet and Malthus show how demographic growth, placed in direct relationship to the availability of resources, has fuelled a recurring opposition between an optimistic view of "progress" and a negative image of "collapse of civilization". The transfer of this governmental apparatus to colonial administration (e.g., with reference to Africa, the 1871 decennial Census of Nigeria, but the Indian case would be even more compelling),[28] and thence to 20th-century development policies highlight the close correlation between demography and modes of control from that of mobility and work, up to birth control policies and the disciplining of sexual and reproductive behaviour (Cooper, Stoler 1989; Sussman, 2004, Duden, 1994; Ittmann 2003).

The emergence in the second half of the 20th century of demographic transition theory as a mainstream paradigm revealing the deep logics of modernisation, and even more its transformation from empirical model into policy tool through which to advance forecasts and development plans (Kirk 1996), occurred precisely at this juncture. In parallel, the term "population" became strongly associated, particularly in the United States, with global concerns regarding the control of "imbalances" and "demographic excesses" of the non-Western populations (Connelly 2003). The popularisation of these concerns is reflected in the expression "population bomb" as Paul Ehrlich's influential bestselling book put it (Ehrlich 1968, Robertson 2012). Much discussed in African historiography, the demographic transition theory[29] has been criticised for supporting the representation of pre-colonial African society as static, and its demography as stagnant due to natural tragedies and wars. This trend, it is claimed, was shaken only by the advent of "modernisation" under colonial rule (see Campbell 1991). Opponents of this view showed how slavery and then colonisation – in conjunction with other cyclical factors including wars, political instability, and diseases – hindered hitherto slow yet constant population growth (Manning 2014; Iliffe 2017). The most recent contributions, however, further complexify the overall picture (Walters 2021), stressing the problem of the sources for the study of African population history. In reality, representations of African demography always proved highly contradictory: a continent long described as underpopulated has suddenly become, in recent analyses, overpopulated. Both depictions have been advanced as "proof" of the purported absence of development in Africa, with some authors going as far to attribute the asserted ungovernability of African demographic dynamics to "exotic" cultural practices, ranging from polygyny to child fostering (Bloom and Sachs 1998: 44).

African demographic transitions

In demography, the use of the term "transitions" in the plural (Willekens 2014) marks a repositioning of this debate. Greater attention is now paid to local contexts and the plurality of factors that co-determine changing trends in birth and fertility rates, including their speed, interruptions, stalls or reversals. Individual cases, by contrast, are correspondingly analysed in the light of complex contextual variations. After all, if the idea of demographic transition emerged within the overarching framework of modernisation, as

noted by Dudley Kirk (1996, p. 361) in a reconstruction of its historical fortunes – "stripped to essentials [the theory] states that societies that experience modernization progress from a pre-modern regime of high fertility and high mortality to a post-modern one in which both are low" – the many directions that modernity has nowadays taken in the non-Western world still constitute the broad background in which African demographic dynamics can be understood. The "plural" linked to African demographic transitions, in other words, simply corresponds to the "plural" characterising nowadays' African trajectories into modernity (Deutsch, Probst, Schmidt, 2002). Accordingly, the current discussion highlighting the specificities and plurality of African demographic transition has notably pointed out a few peculiar elements (see Bloom and Sachs 1998; Groth and May, 2017). First, what is seen as specific is the pace of this transition deriving from the lag intervened between, to put it simply, the speed of decline of death and birth rates. The former started to generally decline since mid-1900s with the introduction of modern health technologies and practices and with specific campaigns, targeting for instance infant mortality. The latter showed on the opposite a much slower decline. A specific factor contributing to this outcome is the slowness and stalls presented, in many cases, by the fertility transition. If initial average total fertility rate around 6 to 8 children per woman was common also in other contexts, what is specific is the persistence of relatively high fertility rates also with declining mortality. Consequently, the general pace of population growth has been rapid and accelerating in recent years. At the same time, the expanding working age population has rarely been paralleled by the decline of dependent youths. General reasons for this can be attributed to the scarcity of formal welfare systems perpetuating a pro-natalist attitude which originated in the African rural societies (Bloom and Sachs 1998). These, however, are extremely general considerations referring to an extremely heterogeneous and diverse phenomenon. Indeed, a large part of current African demographic research is devoted to analysing the various fertility transitions in the continent and their features, including stalls and lags (Akinyoade and Dickson, this issue; see also Boongarts 2017; Schoumaker 2019; Tabutin and Schoumaker 2020). Social sciences also look at this question (Conte, this issue), analysing specific policies adopted by States (Vimard and Zanou 2000), the historical evolutions of fertility (Sevdalakis, Bras and Remund, this issue; Walters 2021), of marriage and sexual habits in their interactions with forms of social control and change (see Fusari, this issue), and more generally the interplay between

cultural, social and economic factors. Sarah Walters's notion of moral demography for instance aims at capturing "how demographic decision-making is structured by a set of codes about honour and respectability ('moral dispositions')" (2017: 74); similarly in anthropology extended monographic studies illuminate context-specific elements, placed into complex life-worlds, group trajectories, geographical variations (Cooper 2019; Johnson-Hanks 2006; in comparative perspective Kreager and Bochow 2017). What is particularly interesting is the research looking at the interconnections between demographic factors and socio-economic changes. Rather than cultural causes or abstracted socio-economic elements, these dynamics could highlight the real background of specific behaviours linked to fertility and reproductive choices. Enquiries of this kind look, for instance, at the relationship between fertility levels and spatial and social mobility in African contexts, the effects of intergenerational relations and tensions on reproductive and migratory patterns, the longer-term demographic and political implications of intra-African labour migration or of long-distance international migration, the gendered interplay of fertility and access to education and work, debates on transformations of family models and fertility, or, lastly, the demographic changes related to the faltering socio-economic integration of young people.

Explorations in cross-disciplines collaboration

Clearly, in these bundles of questions a meeting ground emerges between demography, sociology, anthropology and history. Still, rigidities in interdisciplinary communication persist. In a recent assessment of such debates, David Kertzer (2018) sums up a few historical dividing lines between disciplines, in the effort to overcoming them.[30]

Disconnection seems the key term that according to him has denoted in the recent past the relationship between demography and other social sciences. Kertzer's reflections are specifically devoted to examining the attempts "to bring together sociocultural anthropology and demography, with particular attention paid to the United States" (p. 341) but they can be broadly generalised, particularly considering the comments the article received by Viazzo, Solinas and Micheli (2018). As these authors showed, moving from quite different methodological presuppositions the encounter between the two disciplines often proved quite difficult. Quantitative vs qualitative methods, use of surveys and statistical data vs ethnographic research, aggregate concepts vs

context-specificity, nomothetic vs ideographic, all these opposing approaches reveal divergent directions. Furthermore, in the anthropological list of main topics, core demographic problems or basic demographic issues, fertility and mortality for instance, or population width and dynamics, are rarely addressed (with, however, important counterexamples, as the aforementioned sources demonstrate[31]), and quantitative considerations relevant for any comparative effort frequently evaded. Conversely, the rigid aggregate concepts and the macro-model of demographic transition used by demographers cannot be easily translated within anthropological discussions. Yet, exactly these limitations have also produced attempts at reconnection, on the ground that a discipline that thinks through large aggregates needs more (socially and culturally) contextualised objects of reflection and, in turn, a discipline that works with circumscribed fields of investigation and qualitative data needs large scenarios where its conclusions can take on specific significance. There is, in this sense, the need to identify specific arenas of observation in which to interactively test the problems and perspectives addressed by the two disciplines (see Ciabarri, this issue). Probably, however, the most diverging dynamics between the two fields derive from the habits and disciplinary identities that have emerged over the time, and from the directions the two fields have recently taken. Indeed, if anthropology has moved, during the decades, from structural accounts (functionalism, structuralism, political economy) to accounts focused on agency and interpretation, experimenting connections with cultural and literature studies, philosophy or microhistory; demography, has traditionally moved towards the hard sciences emphasising the formal, statistical and mathematical methods of analysis. One has, thus, emphasised the ideographic perspective, the other the nomothetic. In other words, the relationships that both disciplines have with the models of the natural sciences and with mathematical models or statistics, or the way in which they treat demographic data, to contextualise and historicise or, on the opposite, to quantify and translate them into numbers, seems to be both the source of their diversity and the starting point for a possible collaboration.

Since "dealing with numbers" and with basic demographic data (births, deaths, population's structure and changes, human mobility) is essential for both, a reflection on the significance of numbers is, in this regard, the necessary step to build collaborations. Anthropologists rarely and reluctantly use numbers or macro-concepts – and rarely are trained to do so – and this is a major reason for their weak impact on public discussions. But anthropologists,

together with historians, have built up critical analysis on the social use of numbers (be they state statistics or aggregates produced by experts), that can be fruitfully used for understanding the performative action of numbers. In this light, disconnection does not refer to the relationship between disciplines but between the representation through numbers of the demographic data and the social contexts that generate them. There are two aspects to highlight in this regard. On the one hand, the mathematisation of demographic data and the construction of demography as primarily a quantitative field – in order to generate comparisons, identify regularities, propose predictions – has produced a divergence between contexts and demographic aggregates, and the withdrawing of the latter into a (just) apparently neutral and depoliticised niche. It is equally important to stress how numbers and predictions are not mere descriptive items but indicators that experts "handle with care", even though they often end up in much less cautious hands. On the other hand, the decontextualization of numbers thus produced potentially leads to specific performative effects or manipulative interpretations. Ultimately, all of this is not necessarily bad news. Indeed, if this is the case, if difficulties in joint-collaborations are specifically a matter of disciplinary traditions, overcoming these boundaries is much less difficult than expected. Our goal, with the articles collected in this issue, is to contribute to exploring these directions and show how boundaries can be crossed.

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Notes

1 - See for instance: UNPD (2000), *Replacement Migration*, New York: UN Population Division, https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/replacement-es-fr.pdf; United Nations (2002), *Completing the Fertility Transition*, Population Bulletin of the United Nations, Nos. 48/49, New York; Economic Commission for Africa (2001), *The State of the Demographic Transition in Africa*, December 2001. See also Population and Development Review, 2006, Vol. 32, *The Political Economy of Global Population Change, 1950-2050*, (2006), particularly Demeny and McNicoll 2006a and 2006b. The webpage of the United Nation Population Division (https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/) provides recurrent world reports as well as publications on specific topics.

2 - United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2024). *World Population Prospects 2024, Online Edition* - https://population.un.org/wpp/ (last accessed 01/10/2024).

3 - United Nations (2001), *Completing the Fertility Transition*, Population Bulletin of the United Nations, Nos. 48/49, New York; Economic Commission for Africa (2001), p. 15.

4 - On this point see Buccianti 2006.

5 - United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2024), *World Population Prospects 2024, Summary of Results,* p. 1.

6 - United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (1999), *The World at Six Billion*, 1999; Guengant, 2017, p. 12.

7 - As Dudley Kirk put it "the most exciting problem in modern demography" (1996: 387). See Frejka 2016 for a recent discussion.

8 - See also Caldwell J.C., *The contemporary population challenge*, in United Nations (2002), *Completing the Fertility Transition*, Population Bulletin of the United Nations, Nos. 48/49, New York pp. 81-88.

9 - In quite sober style, in a United Nations report on global demographic trends, John Caldwell comments on the possible consequences of these border policies as follows: "The efforts taken by the rich countries to restrict the flow threaten to change the nature of these societies and to increase racism", in Caldwell J.C., "*The contemporary population challenge*", in United Nations (2002). "*Completing the Fertility Transition*, Population Bulletin of the United Nations", Nos. 48/49, New York pp. 87.

10 - Canning, David, Sangeeta Raja, and Abdo S. Yazbeck, eds. 2015, *Africa's Demographic Transition: Dividend or Disaster?* Africa Development Forum series. Washington, DC: World Bank. doi:10.1596/978-1-4648-0489-2. License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0 IGO; for a view emphasizing more the dividend opportunities see the widely known International Monetary Fund (IMF) Working Paper / Africa Department ,"*Africa Rising: Harnessing the Demographic Dividend*", Prepared by Paulo Drummond, Vimal Thakoor, and Shu Yu, August 2014, and Groth and May, 2017.

11 - Africa Europe Foundation, *Africa and Europe. Facts and figures on African Migrations*, 2022; AU/IOM/FDFA (2019) African Migration Report. Challenging the Narrative https://reliefweb.int/report/world/africa-migration-report-challenging-narrative (last accessed

01/10/2024). For a broader account on inter Africa migrations see de Haas and Frankema 2022.

12 - Fusari has developed this point in Fusari 2020.

13 - UNPD (2000), *Replacement Migration*, New York: UN Population Division, https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/replacement-es-fr.pdf;

14 - See https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/publications/demographic-challenge-myths-and-realities, https://www.thelancet.com/article/S0140-6736(20)30677-2/fulltext.

15 - https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2019/03/15/la-theorie-du-grand-remplacement-de-l-ecrivain-renaud-camus-aux-attentats-en-nouvelle-zelande_5436843_4355770.html - last accessed (01/10/2024).

16 - See https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/sep/01/obsession-migration-figures-immigration-xenophobia. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/06/strange-death-europe-immigration-xenophobia - last accessed (01/10/2024).

17 - https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/projects-activities/demostaf-emerging-population-issues-sub-saharan-africa-cross-checking-promoting_en - last accessed (01/10/2024).

18 - Édouard Conte is conducting further analyses on this point.

19 - https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Voelker_Europas.jpg.

20 - Quoted by Mathieu Olivier in Jeune Afrique 21 May 2014, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/53730/politique/racisme-jean-marie-le-pen-veut-combattre-l-immigration-avec-monseigneur-ebola/.

21 - Libération 20 May 2014 - https://www.liberation.fr/france/2014/05/20/jean-marie-le-pen-craint-le-remplacement-des-populations-francaises-par-l-immigration_1022863/

22 - https://www.capital.fr/economie-politique/marine-le-pen-en-guerre-contre-la-submersion-migratoire-1068215.

23 - https://vivementle9juin.fr/projet), Victims of 'counter-colonisation'.

24 - For an initial reconstruction see Petrovich Njegosh 2023; for the linkage with migration dynamics see Ciabarri 2020.

25 - OECD, *Are the characteristics and scope of African migration outside of the continent changing?*, Migration Data Brief, N° 5, June 2019; Tabutin & Schoumaker 2020.

26 - AU/IOM/FDFA (2019), *African Migration Report. Challenging the Narrative* https://reliefweb.int/report/world/africa-migration-report-challenging-narrative.

27 - In reality, the picture of European demographic dynamics is much more complex and nuanced, as different population components are influenced by various ageing and fertility paths (Gribaldo, Judd,and Kertzer 2009; Uhlenberg 2009; Gardini 2023), shifts in kinship, relatedness and reproductive behaviours (Grilli and Mattalucci 2022; Massa and Scarabello, 2024) as well as internal movements within Europe, which also involve foreigners who have obtained citizenship in different European countries (de Jong and de Valk 2023).

28 - Literature abounds on this field, from Bernard Cohn's classic on census in India (1987). See also Gervais 1996; Ittmann, Cordell, and Maddox 2010.

29 - In reality much discussed also in other disciplines and areas: see for instance

Handwerker 1986; Solinas 1992; Johnson-Hanks 2008.

30 - See also Kertzer and Fricke 1997; Caldwell 1996.

31 - And the list can be further stretched; amongst virtuous inter-disciplinary collaboration see for instance the research project "Compter en situation coloniale. Chiffrer et déchiffrer les empires XIX-XXe siècle" (https://chiffrempire.hypotheses.org/) and in Italy the scientific journal *Popolazione e Storia*, *rivista semestrale della Società Italiana di Demografia Storica*.

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